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## Everquest, reality, and postmodern theories of community

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EVERQUEST, REALITY, AND POSTMODERN THEORIES  
OF COMMUNITY

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

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by  
Brian Jacob-Paul Bailie

June 2007

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OF COMMUNITY

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by


Brian Jacob-Paul Bailie

June 2007

Approved by:

  
Jacqueline Rhodes, Chair, English

  
Ellen Gil-Gomez

  
Renée Pigeon

06/01/07  
Date

## ABSTRACT

EverQuest is a massively multiplayer online role playing game that serves as a practical, yet mundane, incarnation of life as a cyborg in a posthuman community. Using the theoretical lens of cultural materialism, this thesis demonstrates how the words of EverQuest interactants - from message boards, interviews, and player in-game communications - construct the world of EverQuest and the roles of the interactants as its citizens. More specifically, this thesis will argue that the EverQuest world serves to reify the ideas of consumer capitalism that informs the "real" world, even as EverQuest itself promises an escape from that world.



DEDICATION

To Tina. Without her, none of this would have been possible.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### WELCOME TO THE "VIRTUAL" WORLD:

#### SAME AS IT EVER WAS

EverQuest (EQ) is a massively multiplayer online role playing game (mmorpg), or more simply, a game set in a virtual environment. In this virtual environment, players come together and form alliances to complete various tasks as programmed by the developers who work for Sony Online Entertainment (SOE—the parent company that owns and maintains the virtual environment that houses EverQuest ). Which tasks the players complete, along with the methods they choose to achieve their desired goal, reflects the iconic narratives they bring with them into the world of EverQuest.

Using the theoretical lens of cultural materialism, I will demonstrate how the words of the interactants themselves from message boards, interviews, and player in-game communications construct the world and its citizens. These everyday people write themselves and their subjectivity into being, and display their life-controlling archetypical narratives by placing these texts into the public sphere of the material world. More specifically, I

will argue that the EverQuest world serves to reify the ideas of consumer capitalism that informs the "real" world, even as EverQuest itself promises an escape from that world.

Clearly, Dungeons and Dragons and its "roll play"<sup>1</sup> style of adventuring influences EverQuest, and this community is not only informed by the discourse of Dungeons and Dragons (the fantasy world of an incredible medieval society where swords and magic allow a hardy adventurer to succeed in a cruel world and earn valuable treasures while doing so), but also the myths engrained in Western society that promote capitalism. In a world where Horatio Alger (whether directly referenced or not) provides the yardstick for how an individual should hope to progress in society, the same spirit of a skilled, rugged individual who pulls

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<sup>1</sup> "Roll play" refers to the Dungeons and Dragons style of play that focuses on the character build, game mechanics, and combat rounds of any given gaming session. Player who are "roll players" tend only to be interested in making the most powerful character, and therefore, the character that has the most destructive power when it comes to the combat rounds of a campaign. These players also place a high importance on the loot taken from any combatant they encounter once the combatant is dead. This is in opposition to "role-playing" where players act out their character's actions by taking on the avatar's personality as they sit at the gaming table.

himself up by his cyber bootstraps is very apparent in the texts produced by, and the actions of, the players of EverQuest.

### The Importance of Narratives

Rebecca Borah and Inez Schaechterle define roll players (a reference to the dice and numbers crunching aspect of playing Dungeons and Dragons) as game participants "who like to fight and enjoy the mechanics of the game" while they characterize the others, the role players, as "those who prefer to interact in non-combat situations and favor character development" (par. 15). Borah and Schaechterle further differentiate the two camps: "[m]ore often than not, we (and many others) have noted that male players seem to prefer the former type of play to the latter, especially younger males. . . [these type of players seem to enjoy] simply hacking, slashing, pulverizing, or zapping their way through every game" (par. 15).

"[H]acking, slashing, pulverizing or zapping" describes the archetypical gaming action that earns rewards. In Dungeons and Dragons, especially in organized leagues like the Role-Playing Games Association (RPGA),

player parties that "correctly"<sup>2</sup> finish pre-made adventure modules earn gold, experience, weapons, gear, and favorable standing with different player factions. EverQuest, being a descendant of Dungeons and Dragons (and often sharing a large number of players), rewards its players in the same way, so much so that the players of EverQuest have created a myriad of informational websites and informative discussion boards that list, explain, and rank the organizations (called guilds) that have achieved the highest rewards in the game to date. These community sites not only serve as a place to share stories, strategies, and the spoils of playing; they also serve as a place to brag, grade, and spur others on to attaining the same in-game possessions and accomplishments.

These archetypical gaming narratives of violence and acquisition inform everything players do when they choose the avatar that will represent them in EverQuest. This most obvious instance of "self creation" often involves the

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<sup>2</sup> "Correctly" in RPGA often involves finishing within a time limit. While there are no rules saying that a player must create powerful character employing roll play methods, things like the time limit help to promote creating super strong characters since adventures need to be finished quickly and efficiently.

players following the precepts of table-top<sup>3</sup> gaming's dogmatic axioms and, therefore, they create characters built on roll play guidelines. The characters roaming Norrath<sup>4</sup> are not built for make believe role playing, nor do their operators experience a pleasure fitting the traditional definition of "fun." These "toons"<sup>5</sup> are built only to win, to be admired for their abilities, and to allow players to acquire the best synthetic accoutrements possible.

#### Cultural Materialism

According to cultural materialist thought, EverQuest is an evolving set of texts that display the "competing ideas among authors, society, customs, institutions, and [the] social practices" of a society "that are all eventually negotiated" (Bressler 187) by each individual involved using the available episteme. Cultural materialism is also a theoretical point-of-view concerned with language and language use (and here language includes spoken discourse, written discourse, literature, social

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<sup>3</sup> "Table-top" gaming refers to games like Dungeons and Dragons that are played in a physical space, at a table, using manuals, dice, pens, and paper.

<sup>4</sup> The fictional world players inhabit while playing EverQuest.

<sup>5</sup> "Toons," short for "cartoons," is in-game slang for the avatar a player runs.



actions, and any social relationships) that can be used by "a person or group to impose their ideas or actions upon another" (Bressler 188). In EverQuest's player community, it is possible to see how this imposition both occurs, and plays out as the cohesive "glue" (the episteme) that holds this community together. The Western archetypical narratives that promote capitalism inform this episteme, and because of this, EverQuest is a place of free markets and the undying belief that individualism within a corporate capitalist setting is the only way to achieve anything worthwhile.

#### Norrath: Bastion of Individualism and Meritocracy

In EverQuest's synthetic world of competition and self-promotion, players serve as their own publicists. Players fiercely defend their abilities while also striking down those they view as deficient or incompetent by posting on community websites. Such posts like "Warriors (the one we can do without)" (<[www.berthall.com](http://www.berthall.com)>), in which the player behind the avatar Flintx is criticized for his alleged sub-par game play, or larger posts that deal with

overall guilds like "Dragon Council WRU<sup>6</sup>" (<www.berthall.com>), in which an entire guild is scolded for its lack of progress, demonstrate the competition inherent in a capitalistic society. These posts serve as public shamings, a way for the entire server community to be enlightened concerning Flintx's and Dragon Council's breaking of in-game conventions. The strongest are strong, according to this rationale, through some intangible quality, some mysticism. If these individuals, or their guilds, do not meet such standards, they deserve a public shaming.

The "mysticism" in these two posts (and many others like them) reflects an unarticulated belief in individualism, the narrative that espouses "the primary importance of the individual and in the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence" ("Individualism," def. 1a). This doctrine informs much of the larger EverQuest community, since it ties into the larger technological community's views on independent contractors and non-union shops, as well as the strong Libertarian view that government intrusion into the tech industry impedes the

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<sup>6</sup> "WRU" is in-game shorthand for "where are you?"

creation and marketing of better hardware and software.<sup>7</sup>

This ideology, in EverQuest, is often complemented by faith in meritocracy, or a system where "advancement is based on ability or achievement" ("Meritocracy," def. 1).

Meritocracy in EverQuest is seen, largely, in how player-formed organizations (called guilds) encourage interactant participation and loyalty. This mix of meritocracy and mysticism - or more precisely, the belief in individualism underneath mysticism - lies beneath the "public shamings" important in the EverQuest community. People who do not perform are considered unworthy, either of guild membership or of possessions they have accrued. It is in this sense that the "real" world of corporate capitalism becomes an integral part of the EverQuest "fantasy" world: meritocracy and mysticism enter the virtual world of EverQuest through the players themselves, and the ideas become part of the tapestry of American archetypical narratives that have shaped this originally cultural-neutral space. Through the introduction of these

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<sup>7</sup> For an example of these ideas please visit <<http://ea-spouse.livejournal.com/274.html>>. The writer is the spouse of an Electronic Arts (EA) employee, and she's commenting on EA's violation of several labor laws. Some responses display the mindset I describe here, while others bemoan the fact that this is common practice for the industry. Some even call for change.

iconic narratives, EverQuest appears more and more like the material plane its interactants inhabit when not playing.

This drive to foreground talent and essence and individual "specialness" through language (and writing in particular) echoes Michel Foucault in The Order of Things. In this work, Foucault describes the fictional character Don Quixote "like a sign, a long, thin graphism, a letter that has just escaped from the open pages of a book. His whole being is nothing but language, text, printed pages, stories that have already been written down" (46). Like Don Quixote, the avatars of EverQuest are merely the virtual representations of the discourses, stories, and archetypical narratives that the players have learned in "real life." The competitive, driven avatars that roam Norrath are the textual attempts to make the virtual environment of the game "real" at the same time as they make the material reality of Western society "real." This endeavor reinforces the episteme of Western society and creates a written genre for which individual players learn the appropriate rhetorical moves. EverQuest, therefore, serves as a fantasy of the real world, a foreign world that is not too foreign.

This concept of a familiar fantasy setting is important for the player because it allows a type of reciprocity between the virtual world of EverQuest and the physical world of material reality. By becoming a place where the myths of capitalism can be played out and made real, EverQuest creates an order of things that the individual player can understand and comprehend. At the same time, the supposedly "blank slate" of the online gaming world (in which anything--hypothetically--is possible) reinforces the dominant class values of twenty-first century corporate America. In so doing, EverQuest simultaneously reifies the dominant worldview of its players and developers and precludes other worldviews (perhaps more liberatory) from occurring in the virtual world and the everyday real world of the gamer.

#### A Demonstration

This collision of capitalistic episteme and the virtual world of Norrath is best demonstrated by the website Big Kills of Bertoxxulous (<<http://shahrazadguild.com/BKB/index.htm>>) (Figure 1). This player-made site demonstrates which guilds have progressed the furthest in overall guild-centric quest content.



# BIG KILLS OF BERTOXXULOUS

The Buried Sea													
Captured Portal													Captured Portal
Stalwart Defenders													Stalwart Defenders
Deadly Swarm													Deadly Swarm
Mayong's Mistress													Mayong's Mistress
-	PR	DC	Om	CV	ES	GH	Wre	Inv	RF	SH	First	-	-
The Serpent Spine													
Frostcrypt Arc													
The Shade King													The Shade King
Harfange													Harfange
Grenwald													Grenwald
King Odeen													King Odeen
Ashengate Arc													
Lethar													Lethar
Dyn'Leth												PR	Dyn'loth
Stitch												PR	Stitch
Sothgar												PR	Sothgar
Vergalid												PR	Vergalid
-	PR	DC	Om	CV	ES	GH	Wre	Inv	RF	SH	First	-	-
Prophecy of Ro													
Deathknoll													
Ayona	10-Jan	13-Feb										PR	Ayona
Threesome												PR	Threesome
Vertigo												PR	Vertigo
Gargoyles												PR	Gargoyles
Razorthorn, Tower of Sullian Zek													
Sullon												PR	Sullon
Snowtail												EN	Snowtail
Ghost												EN	Ghost



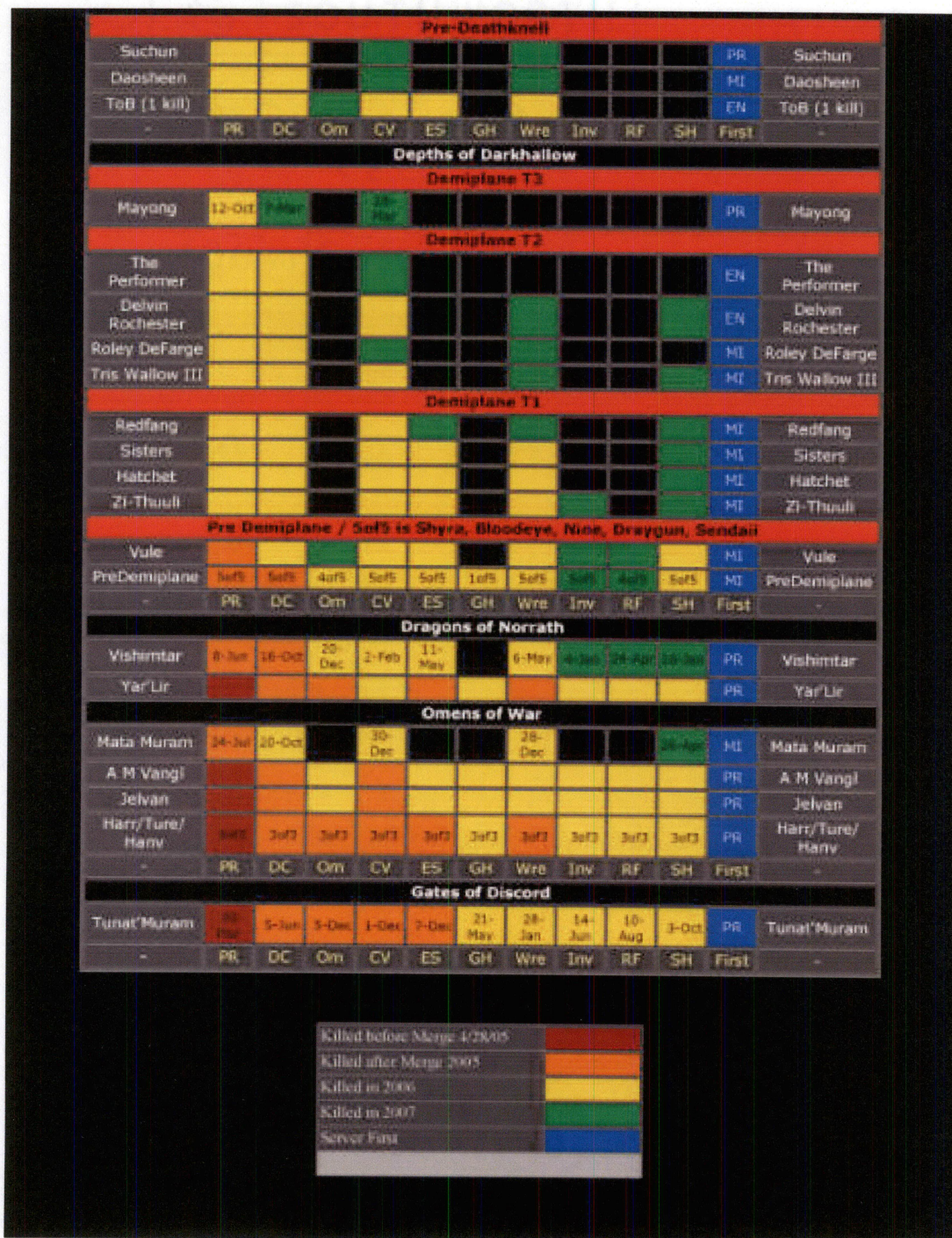


Figure 1. Big Kills of Bertoxxulous

Big Kills of Bertoxxulous. Ed. Greyce. 17 Dec. 2006.  
 13 Apr. 2007. Shahrazad.  
<http://shahrazadguild.com/BKB/index.htm>.

To display this progress, this site provides a table that ranks the overall worth of each guild, much like the rankings corporations are given by business indices. The acronyms in the center of the table represent each guild which has entered the list by killing the base required monster, Tunat'Muram.<sup>8</sup> The titles in the center are the names of the various expansions EverQuest has seen since 2004, and the names to the left or right of the table that fit underneath that title are monsters (also, in the parlance of the game, called "mobs") associated with that specific expansion.

In this table, value, worth, progress, and time are represented as a positive movement on an upward trend. The monsters from the most recent expansion are "worth" more, and so guilds are better or worse depending on their confirmed "kills" of more recent monsters. Again, this graph is much like a business graph that list profits as a

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the monster, Tunat'Muram, being listed as the entry-level raid target to join this fraternity of "Big Killers" is a completely community formed standard. I surmise the reason this mob has been given this entry level status is because of the long and involved series of events that an entire guild must pass through to even have access to fighting this monster. By running this complex gauntlet, it seems that other guilds take said guild seriously and allow the organization onto the "Big Kills" board.



positive movement upwards, and therefore the guild whose bar graph is highest on the chart is the best guild.

Much like a shareholder views a company's performance as good or bad by using charts, individual members judge whether their guild meets their expectations by comparing their guild's progress against other guilds. Members (and prospective members) use this type of information to understand the worth of the guild since these guilds will distribute the rewards (like RPGA Dungeons and Dragons) for killing a mob to its individual members. The loot is often not platinum (the major currency of EverQuest) but weapons and gear (plate mail, leather pieces, silk clothing, and jewelry that improves an avatar's abilities) that are considered priceless within the in-game economy. The higher a guild is on the chart, the better weapons and gear awarded to members within that guild. Players looking for a guild clamor to join the highest-rated guilds and existing members have tacit status through association with the guild<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> All avatars display their names and guild affiliations above their heads in game for easy identification by other interactants.

## Wages in a Synthetic World

This capitalistic system of wages and bonuses even informs how this loot is distributed. Several guilds use a type of pay-for-play system called "DKP," short for Dragon Kill Points (recalling a time when a majority of rpg monsters were dragons). The guild leadership determines how these points are awarded (for making the raid call time, staying the entire time of the raid, killing a particularly nasty mob, etc.), just like a corporation sets the basic wage for a specific job. If not DKP, the guild may use "Merit," which (as the name says) rewards merit with loot. Loot is awarded as a bonus for good guild behavior, much like bonuses are handed out in corporations for a successful financial quarter. It is important to note that this system does not distribute wealth equally; it is, rather, a system that rewards consistent attendance (a player needs to participate in a raid to earn the loot) and adherence to dominant guild values (a player needs to be a good "team member").<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> If a player does not attend raids on a regular basis or if said player does not meet the standards of being a "good member," then that player is denied loot. Insidiously, this lack of loot becomes another form of public shaming. The punished player will not be to par with his peers, and

After viewing the Big Kills... website, it is not too far-fetched to call these players "wage slaves;" a sample of the "Big Kills" guilds shows a substantial amount of time put in by the players to participate and "earn" their rewards.<sup>11</sup> The fantasy/real difference is that a player who put in the 20 to 40 hours a week that it takes to participate in a "Big Kills" guild will receive compensation (community status and accoutrements that directly upgrade their avatar in the virtual world) far greater than anything that their material world jobs might provide.

It is in this sense that Foucault's discussion of Don Quixote can connect again to the virtual world of EverQuest. A player's avatar serves as the player's own "Don Quixote," engaging in the capitalistic romances of Alger and the myth of the rugged individual through guild

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this invites criticism and derision on public/private guild websites and during in-game communications.

<sup>11</sup> Dragon Council asks players to clear their schedules from 5:30pm EST to 11:00pm Monday-Friday, 5:00pm EST to 11:00pm EST Saturday and 3:00pm EST to 11:00pm EST Sundays <<http://www.dragon-council.net/application.html>>; and Crusaders Valorous from 7:30 pm EST to 12:00 pm EST on weeknights (Monday to Thursday); Friday is an off night, and Saturday is reserved for epic kills; Sunday, at approximately 6:30 pm EST and end by 12:00pm EST <<http://www.crusadersvalorous.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=22211>>.

raiding becomes the "individual prescription for [the player's] adventures" (Foucault, Order 46). Like Don Quixote, a player's avatar must fulfill the narratives that the player believes in and trusts within material reality; the avatar suddenly "must endow with reality the signs-without-content of the [capitalistic] narrative. His adventures will be a deciphering of the world: a diligent search over the entire surface of the earth for the forms that will prove what the books say is true" (Foucault, Order 47).

The individual EverQuest interactant, by spending several hours and earning his DKP or Merit, proves that the American Dream is true. By being good, rugged individuals, ready to place their time and skill into the overall incorporated guild in return for weapons and gear, the gamers prove to themselves that the worldview of capitalism is true since it works in the material world and in the virtual world. The gamers' Don Quixotes stride the virtual plains of EverQuest proving individualism and meritocracy are true and real; and through making these narratives "real" these gamers turn EverQuest into an exact replica of the United States. Suddenly, things that are nothing more than a rhetorical explanation for the American episteme

(and have been proven wrong by the Great Depression) are made real by EverQuest.

The American Dream Made Real by Simulacra:  
Or, This is Fun?

Still, this idea begs the question: why? Why would players, who claim to want to escape the physical, material reality they are entangled in every day, reproduce the same reality with a shiny, dirt free veneer of polygons and artificial lighting? Jean Baudrillard asserts that our present

brute fascination for images, above and beyond all moral or social determination, is also not that of dreaming or imaginary, understood in the traditional sense. Other images, such as those in painting, drawing, theatre or architecture, have been better able to make us dream or imagine; other modes of expression as well (undoubtedly language makes us dream better than the image). So there is something more than that which is peculiar to our modern media images: if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are sites of production of meaning and

representation — this would not be new — it is on the contrary because they are sites of the disappearance of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgment of reality, thus sites of a fatal strategy of denegation of the real and the reality principle. (194)

In a cybercommunity like EverQuest, the environment offers a virtual panoply of images without meaning, produced and reproduced at a mind-numbing speed. This space should one in which where anything and everything is possible. A player can force his avatar to dance a jig, sing, go on a drinking binge of epic proportions, or run him to his death by jumping off the side of a cliff and onto his own sword—there would be no physical consequences that the gamer could possibly suffer. Even with the back-story of the game (which in game is called "lore") players could live out the various deity/alignment stories and completely escape the humdrum banality of physical existence. Here, in this virtual space, a player can become a messianic general who leads the Human race against the evil armies of

the Tier'Dal.<sup>12</sup> But this type of immersion role-playing almost never occurs since a majority of players desire the best sword, breastplate, or augment. Participating in the lore of the synthetic world will never fulfill this desire for material goods.

Still, as the Big Kills ... website can attest, Baudrillard's critique of modern images holds true in EverQuest. Meaning, even fabricated meaning created by "the lore" that is the back story for this community, disappears once the interactant is immersed in the world of EverQuest. An economy of meaning, based on the present day mainstream American episteme, or to borrow Foucault's words, "an order of things," must be established so the individual acts of communication have meaning; so an individual avatar's actions/communications have social value; so the player controlling the avatar has a set of rules to decipher the information he receives while logged into EverQuest. Through this codex, the player's Don Quixote experiences truth (in opposition to Foucault's use of this character construction as a metaphor) as "the relation of words to the world" and "in that slender and

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<sup>12</sup> The Tier'Dal are a race of evil elves that live only to spread their doctrine of hate and destruction on the good and valiant forces of the Norrathian population.

constant relation woven between themselves by verbal signs" (Foucault, Order 48).

The EverQuest player will reproduce all the discourse of material reality (archetypical narratives of place, value, worth; the economy of capitalism; gender relations; the relation of thought to language/sign) in a cybercommunity in order to give meaning, order, and purpose to the material world's episteme since it can function in place supposedly devoid of all "real world" influences. Players crave the reification of capitalism since they know nothing else, and they transform this desire into virtual reality. This virtual reality, where even the lowest paid wage earner can suddenly become a cyber Getty, breeds hope and continued blind allegiance to Western capitalism.

#### The Precession of Simulacra

It is thus possible to see EverQuest as a cyber community that meets/enacts Baudrillard's description of the "precession of simulacra." Baudrillard asserts:

All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning, and that something



could guarantee this exchange—God, of course.

But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (196)

And in EverQuest, God is simulated. Even if a player chose to follow the precepts of their avatar's god, there are still fifteen other gods, fourteen other racial worldviews, and fifteen other classes with their accompanying ideologies constantly problematizing the player's (and avatar's) individual agency, so the system is weightless. There is no transcendental signified to anchor virtual reality. In this void, the narratives of Dungeons and Dragons/Alger/individualism/meritocracy/capitalism become the default organizing principle for this virtual world, which are all just as temporary and fictitious as the lore of EverQuest. Place this situation into the larger context of a material reality, which since the end of the sixteenth century "the signs of language no longer have any value

apart from the slender fiction which they represent" (Foucault, Order 48), and there are suddenly two weightless systems, one feeding the other, one reifying the other in a continuous, reciprocal loop.

The test if a culture's episteme is real, then, becomes its adoption by a large number of interactants, and in particular, if there is a dominant class that profits from it and will defend it all costs. Just as in physical reality, this too happens in the cybercommunity of EverQuest.

#### Defending the Dominant Hegemony

Defenders of the Faith. In yet another thread of posts from Bert Hall ([www.berthall.com](http://www.berthall.com)), entitled "<http://nitrous.org/aor/>," it is possible to see what happens when the episteme of the community is threatened. This thread happened sometime ago in the history of the Bertoxxulous Server (there are different servers in the overall make-up of EverQuest so as to ensure more efficient running of the game), and has to do with the creation of a grassroots movement to try and flag people for high end quest content that is available with the "Planes of Power" expansion of EverQuest.

The creator of the thread, a player going by the avatar handle Kreo, is trying to start this grassroots, non-guild movement. In this thread, he presents the website of an open raid association on the Tribunal server, called Ayonae's Open Raiders, that did reasonably well according to its own history on the organization's website (<http://nitrous.org/aor>) and comments by supporters on Bert Hall. This is completely the opposite of the Big Kills ... website mentality, and other members of the Bertoxxulous community censure Kreo for his challenge of the dominant hegemony.

Jimette responds to Kreo by saying:

[D]o you think you get a whole bunch of people together on a pickup raid to do, say Quavonis Firetail, in the 15 minutes between him being up, and being swamped by any of the 4 different level 70 groups from the four different time-equipped guilds?

You have to realise [sic] the current insane difference between end-game players and casual players are going to get wider, not narrower. Once you have 6 level 70 people in full Tier 4/5/Quarm gear, you will see any potential pickup

raid target being one grouped - or less - in the same way that High Priest in Ssra can be duoed [sic] now.

Pickup raids are an interesting way of raging against the dying of the light, in the same way you feel sorry for the spider trying to crawl out of the toilet bowl, but if you want to get anywhere, you will:

- Create a guild
- Invest in your guildmates time / equipment / knowledge
- Work hard to keep it together

Anything [sic] other approach to getting near the middle of the game, and your [sic] dreamin'.

Ralkora responds in a similar fashion:

Seriously. Putting people like this into the EP's...[sic]

I'm sorry that's just a dumb idea. I always said it was possible (hence the "theres another guild that does this" in the other thread).

However it's just a stupid idea.

Look at the problems the opening of HoH and

BoT and Valor created. People getting to 10% in 1 round of a giants melee unslowed etc... [sic] without procs. Sorry, if you were to create that in the elemental planes, I can tell you the support you get would be a lot lower from the people in high end guilds. And YOU KNOW it makes a difference. (Don't tell me for example that you would have done bemo if your highest tank was 6k buffed, which many of these 65 wars are today, instead of having Bearhammer or Aarl...[sic]

Putting these low geared low aa people into the EP's is like letting a bunch of civilians into a crime scene. Its just gonna fug [sic] stuff up.

This vehemence goes on for another eight pages. Other arguments loosely related to this topic and often pointing out the huge divide between those with gear (and therefore community power) even erupt and spill out onto the page. While the reasons listed by the two posts above do make sense from a game mechanics point-of-view, what is forgotten, quite simply, is that EverQuest is a game. If individual players decide to participate in an ill-fated bid to enter the higher level content, then it is the

choice of the players and should be respected. One might even argue that such a choice is not really worthy of comment, since it will not affect other players in any material, physical way.

What such a choice (or challenge) does affect is social mobility within EverQuest, and it also suddenly offers a new way to progress within the game besides the already established methods as proscribed by the Bertoxxulous Server's episteme. This new method threatens the social hierarchy within the virtual world of the game and, thus, the order of the physical, material world. The idea that an individual must "create a guild," "invest" in "time/equipment/knowledge," and that individual must take it upon themselves to "work hard to keep it together," smacks of the American entrepreneurial dream. Jimette's continued harsh criticism and constant reiteration of this methodology continues throughout all nine pages of the thread. The idea that this method is the only way to achieve success is important to the player behind the avatar "Jimette"—he feels a compulsion to speak out and defend the entrepreneurial tactic in ever more violent and combative terms.

Ralkora's statement that "[p]utting these low geared low aa people into the EP's is like letting a bunch of civilians into a crime scene" suddenly propels a simple pastime activity onto the level of importance of a police investigation, foregrounding, once again, how seriously these players feel about "everyone and anyone" being allowed into high-level (for this expansion and at this time in the lifespan of EverQuest) content. The stylistic choice to compare the entry of the "casual" (non "Big Killers") players into exclusive areas with a crime scene highlights the disastrous outcomes players like Jimette and Ralkora see as the only possibility when the traditional method of social climbing/character betterment is abandoned.

This "forgetting" that EverQuest is a game is not a momentarily lapse of reason, but the epistemic fusion of material reality and virtual reality. Each feeds the other: one provides hope that the other will one day prove true for the most humble of participants, and the other proves the first's validity as the correct way to order a world formed by so many different religions, subjectivities, and ideologies. Yet in a material reality formed through discourse and a material reality where the

most influential discourses are broadcast as a series of images that saturate the individual participants, the line between cybercommunities like EverQuest and the physical world is suddenly porous. Which weightless system informs the other is always in question. The episteme used in both realities serves to protect those with power and organize/coerce those who have less power; and yet the hope of attaining more power and bettering one's position within the social hierarchy becomes the only context that allows one to make sense of the world (virtual or material).



## CHAPTER TWO

### MONEY, POWER, AND RESPECT

#### Commerce and Theatrics

Logging into EverQuest and entering the zone called "the bazaar" allows a player to enter a virtual market of goods (and sometimes services) that add an element not present for players within table-top Dungeons and Dragons: the ability to participate in a player-driven economy. Here, SOE developers try to keep the fantasy of a medieval society going by placing players' avatars within a great hall, designating the platforms that run throughout the zone as "vendor stalls," and allowing people to hawk their wares by calling out to the entire zone. The great hall itself has ornate carvings set within the walls; Romanesque pillars and archways support the domes placed above the avatars' heads; and (supposedly) period dressed bankers provide money changing and storage services while they stand next to magical teleportation devices that send avatars to other parts of the large structure.

The presence of magic, along with the architectural flourishes of the zone itself, is the first hint to a discerning player of the "cultural hallucination" (to

borrow from Umberto Eco) upon which this system is built: a theatricality that combines a hazily remembered past with conventions of the fantasy genre which allows participants to be amused and pass the time. Surely, few of the interactants actually believe this zone to be historically accurate (which, to be fair, it doesn't claim to be); nor do they protest the presence of magical, Star-Trek-like "teleporters," as a violation of the fabric of their quasi-medieval reality. This fiction allows the players to see this virtual setting as a place of Derrida-esque play. Still, this hallucination and theatricality continues the re-establishment of capitalistic mindsets within this cybercommunity. As Eco explains:

[S]ince the theatricality is explicit, the hallucination operates in making the [participants] take part in the scene and thus become participants in that commercial fair that is apparently an element of the fiction but in fact represents the substantial aim of the whole imitative machine. (202)

The aim of EverQuest is, of course, to make money. In 2002, EverQuest provided a \$5 million a month return at a 40% gross profit margin for Sony Online Entertainment

(Keighley). This profit is a mixture of the initial software purchase by the user and the continued monthly payment of fourteen dollars a month. Members of the EverQuest community see this monthly expenditure (an EverQuest rent payment, basically) as a perfectly normal aspect of life in present day America and, for the most part, pay obediently so they can continue to participate on their chosen EverQuest server.

#### Commodification

Still, this exchanging of real world currency for services makes EverQuest a commodity, and this commodification places the individual player in a social role not that different from the one they inhabit in "real" life: a member of the bourgeoisie. This overlapping existence inside and outside the synthetic world of EverQuest has quiet, yet far reaching, effects for the participants, for Sony Online Entertainment, and for cyber communities in general.

Jürgen Habermas describes the creation of the bourgeoisie as a self-conscious, independent class separate from the traditional estates at the point in Western history when "commodity owners could view themselves as

autonomous" (46) from the ideological control of a sovereign monarch. Commodity owners granted themselves this autonomy by purchasing goods and services, or purchasing admission into environments (the theater, the music hall, the art museum) that hitherto had been the exclusive domain of those from the ruling estates. In this way, the concept of a bourgeoisie public sphere was formed as the new participants became a writing public who shared their opinions and judgments with other, interested parties.<sup>13</sup>

The same thing has occurred (and continues to occur) in EverQuest. Websites like Bert Hall and EvilGamer.net are the "Tischgesellschaften [table societies], salons, and coffee houses" that differ "in the size and composition of their publics, the style of proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations" at the same time as they systematize "discussion among private people that [tend] to be ongoing" (Habermas 36). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the posting "<http://nitrous.org/aor/>" is a topical discussion of the proper ways for players to

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<sup>13</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this concept please see Jürgen Habermas' The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.

advance their avatars through the convoluted guild quest system germane to EverQuest. Postings from EvilGamer.net, which are class-specific discussions started by players who run shadowknights, are exemplified by "No DOT Snare Revisited" (Klotar). In this discussion, players who run shadowknight avatars debate the merits of having a new "snare" spell<sup>14</sup> without a "DoT."<sup>15</sup> The concept, in the tradition of the Enlightenment, is discussed calmly and rationally using logic based on players' observations.

These texts created for public consumption based on fictional characters returns us to the Foucauldian concept of Don Quixote. Again, in this space, a class of people writes their existence -- their consciousness as a discourse community -- into being with these postings. In this instance, however, the concept foregrounded is the idea of commodity. Here it is possible to see the recreation of the social order found in material reality (mentioned and discussed in chapter one) through the same

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<sup>14</sup> This is a spell that decreases a mob's rate of movement across a space.

<sup>15</sup> DoT is in-game short hand for "damage over time," a type of spell that removes a set amount of hit points from a mob every six seconds for a pre-determined set number of seconds. Six seconds is the duration of one round of fighting, which is a game mechanic that has its origins in Dungeons and Dragons.

sort of organizing body: a private people who see themselves as standing against--and separate from--the body that governs EverQuest, Sony Online Entertainment.

#### Buying Freedom

This occurrence not only makes the virtual environment of the cyber community more realistic, but also gives EverQuest its initial drawing power. By mirroring the creation of social order in the practical world, this recreated bourgeoisie public sphere also keeps order within the cyber community and creates the game's long-term staying power. This long term staying power becomes most visible in the buying that occurs in the abovementioned EverQuest "bazaar," which is no more than "an interior [that] is always a disguised supermarket" (Eco 202). This mentality of "avatar supermarkets" spreads to websites outside of EverQuest where actual American dollars are traded for gear, in-game currency, and avatars. This buying "obsessively, believing that you are still playing" (Eco 202) reproduces the material world concept that consumption "is the ultimate--and only--"freedom" available" (Wilkie).

To experience this freedom, players will violate point nine of the EverQuest User Agreement and Software License,

which states players "may not buy, sell, or auction (or host or facilitate the ability to allow others to buy, sell, or auction) any Game [sic] characters, items, or coin or copyrighted material" (EQ Players). The penalty for such an infringement is "banishment;" the user will not be able to log into their account to access his avatar and the user will be prohibited from opening another account with Sony Online Entertainment.

In this space, players attempt to reproduce what they understand as "freedom," and since they are members of a consumer culture outside the synthetic world of EverQuest, this means they will buy "obsessively, believing that [they] are still playing" (Eco 202). This freedom makes them much like the bourgeoisie as described by Habermas, a class of private people entering a

stratum, which more than any other was affected and called upon by mercantilist policies, the state authorities evoked a resonance leading the publicum, the abstract counterpart of the public authority into an awareness of itself as the latter's opponent, that is, as the public of the now emerging public sphere of civil society. For the latter developed to the extent to which the

public concern regarding the private sphere of civil society was no longer confined to the authorities but was considered by the subjects as one that was properly theirs. Besides the carriers of commercial and finance capitalism, a growing group of entrepreneurs, manufacturers, and factory owners became dependent upon the measures taken by the state administration whose intent certainly was not merely controlling commercial-entrepreneurial activity but also the of encouraging initiative through regulation.

(24, emphasis in original)

Now, with this recreation of material world capital versus sovereign, the world of EverQuest becomes a microcosm of capitalistic Western society. By making the underlying ideology of a fictional world the same ideology of the material world, the same arguments, ills, and deficits of the practical world re-occur in the virtual world surrounding EverQuest. Enterprises such as mysupersales.com offer services/products of a dubious nature that may prove detrimental to the overall health of the player/avatar, and these companies abstain from responsibility by declaring that "[t]he Company [sic] makes



no representation or claims to any title for any accounts or virtual items purchased or sold through this site. The Company furthre [sic] makes no representations regarding the transferability, use, and ownership of any such accounts or virtual items"

(<<http://www.mysupersales.com/terms.aspx>>); or outright disavow any knowledge of the consequences for such commerce like ThSale. ThSale states in its FAQ section that "[w]e have no knowledge of. . . banning player accounts that purchase gold from legitimate seller like us (who doesn't use cheat-ware, robots, and macros to farm gold)" (<<http://www.thsale.com/FAQs.aspx>>).

Using these services as a way to experience freedom as a consumer becomes the way interactants in this cyber community differentiate themselves and establish their social rank and provides the index from which worth and value of an item/avatars (and through them the rank and respect due to a player) can be determined. Those who have more items/gear that are "priceless" (when rated against the value index created by this economy) become the elite of their respective servers; they also become the educators and demagogues of the community.

### Example of an EverQuest Educator

By returning to "No DOT Snare Revisited," it is possible to see an EverQuest educator in action. The post, as discussed before, talks about the possibility of a change in the basic spells of the shadowknight class. When one of the highest rated shadowknights, Twinkeltoes, adds his comments to the post, discussion on the issue stops for one post so a lesser shadowknight, Blacksoul, can comment on Twinkeltoes' gear. The deference paid to this interactant is due to his character's build and gear (this can be viewed by clicking on the "sig," or graphic, that represents the avatar in this format (it should be noted that Twinkeltoes' sig displays the avatar's guild affiliation; Phantom Raiders<sup>16</sup>). After Twinkeltoes posts, Blacksoul replies, "Twinkletoes...[sic]I like your choice of augments. Giving you great AC but still allowing for HP. Wish list..damn I got a long way to go with this toon" (emphasis, punctuation original). The player behind Twinkeltoes teaches other shadowknights what a "good" shadowknight build looks like by displaying Twinkeltoes in

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<sup>16</sup> The Big Kills website shows Phantom Raiders is one of the most highly rated guilds.

the public sphere. Twinkeltoes teaches by example, and this example creates envy.

This envy drives several players to continue playing, and is a community byproduct that Sony Online Entertainment encourages and manipulates with similar forums (found at station.com) so as to encourage "initiative through regulation" (Habermas 24). The "long way" that Blacksoul refers to is the amount of time he'll have to spend logged into EverQuest, the political maneuvering to get within a desirable guild, and the number of raids that he will have to attend to build up the DKP or Merit to attain the combination of status and strength (referred to as a character's "uberness [sic]" in player parlance) that Twinkeltoes now enjoys. All of Twinkeltoes items/gear/weapons is priceless within the social/economic index formed by the commerce inside and outside the game. The only way, within the regulations SOE has created within EverQuest, for Blacksoul to reach this level of uberness is to take the initiative to join a top guild like Phantom Raiders (PR); PR is one of the few elite guilds on the server that is currently defeating mobs that reward players - legally - with that caliber of armor class (ac)/hit points (hps) augments (aug) to which Blacksoul refers.

In a more practical sense, the "initiative through regulation" (and its accompanying envy) comes from the mechanics of the game itself. It will be impossible for Blacksoul to achieve Twinkeltoes' status without the help of a guild. On average (at the time of this writing), a shadowknight in EverQuest has 9,000 hit points "unbuffed." With hit point buffs, alternate advancement points, and tribute points, this hypothetical shadowknight may be able to increase his hit points to 12,500. Any mob that could provide the augments that Blacksoul covets would have hundreds of thousands of hit points; while Blacksoul may be able to damage a mob a few hundred hit points per round, the mob will hit for thousands (if not tens of thousands) of hit points per round.

Blacksoul will need a guild of other avatars of various classes (in-game professions) to provide the necessary tools to defeat the monsters that drop the items that Twinkeltoes possesses. Blacksoul will need cleric/shaman/paladin/druid avatars that can provide hit point buffs, other enchanter/shaman avatars that can cast hit point debuffs (and various other detrimental spells like slow, which decreases the number of attacks a mob has during an encounter, making the mob less effective during

his attack rounds), clerics/shamans/druids who can cast heal hit spells on their compatriots who lost hit points due to the mob's attacks, and still more members (rogues, shadowknights, necromancers, wizards, magicians, berserkers, and rangers) that will provide the damage per second to make the fight end before the healing/debuffing classes run out of "mana," or magical energy (distinct from overall character energy contained in hit points). As mentioned in chapter one, all of these independent players come together and incorporate under a guild banner so as to have a chance at earning rare items like Twinkeltoes has; they are wage slaves for Merit or DKP and in this sense, perhaps it is better to see guilds as less of military alliances and more like the mercantile associations of medieval society who banded together for trade, occupational, or economic reasons.

#### How to Gain an Audience with a Monarch

##### Garner Respect; Develop a Solid Ethos

Twinkeltoes has an amount of community cachet because he has run this gauntlet of time and effort, guild exclusion to guild inclusion, and item mediocrity (the norm of the index created by the in-game and outside the game

economy) to item superiority. This avatar's social position is reflected not only in the deference paid to him by other players, but also through the rank given to him by EvilGamer.net and the station.com on their respective public forums.

At station.com Twinkeltoes ranks as a "master" for his 145 posts; on EvilGamer.net Twinkeltoes is considered a "senior member" for his 190 posts. And here, combining the avatar's guild's status on the Big Kills ... board, the avatar's gear in-comparison to other avatars of the same class, and the respect given to him on game wide message boards, it is safe to say that others deem Twinkeltoes an educator and demagogue of the Bertoxxulous server--even though his post rankings and his community status do not mean he enacts the role of educator nor that he posts anything useful to anyone else. Nonetheless, this ranking based on sheer number of posts allows him the communal cachet to become, as Habermas would put it, "the publicum, the abstract counterpart of the public authority into an awareness of itself as the latter's opponent, that is, as the public of the now emerging public sphere of civil society" in opposition to the "state authority" exuded over EverQuest by SOE (24). This is all done through social

construction and the creation of agency through text, which the player behind Twinkeltoes parlays into credibility at station.com when he replies to the post "The Importance of Stats."

#### Confessing for the Monarch's Benefit

In the conversation sparked by the post "The Importance of Stats," both Sony Online Entertainment and the players enact roles eerily reminiscent of the state and the emerging bourgeoisie as described by Habermas in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An EverQuest designer called Merloc writes the initial post, stating that he'd like to solicit "some feedback from players on how they view different stats with respect to the class(es) they play." Merloc readily admits to having his "own view on things," yet he finds it—for whatever reason—important to know the players' "own views." To inveigle this laying open of self within a public message board, Merloc creates a basic form that he wants the players to:

take a look at this list of the basic item stats  
(feel free to include any others that I left  
out), and let me know how and why they think they  
are, or aren't, important to your class. All

comments are useful, and feel free to use current items as examples to illustrate your points if you feel the need. Be sure to INCLUDE THE CLASS name, so I can put your feedback in context.

(emphasis in original)

Merloc even closes the post saying "Hopefully, I'll gain some new insights that will help me do my job better."

In classic Pavlovian style, several players that form the cyber community that surrounds the game within EverQuest respond wholeheartedly. There are (at the time of this writing) 296 posts to Merloc's original post, not counting the three of Merloc's own replies to various questions that pop up throughout the life of the thread.

Our quintessential shadowknight/participant/player, Twinkeltoes, responds as well. On page five of the thread Twinkeltoes congratulates Merloc for his query:

First off I want to say thank you for asking us what WE think is important to the classes we play everyday and not tell us what we should get. As you can see for the most part people are on the same pages for their respective classes and we hope you take what we feel our needs are into serious consideration for future itemizations.



Interestingly, Twinkeltoes uses the pronoun "we" as if he represents a large contingent of players using the Bertoxxulous Server. Officially, he does not; there was never any formal move to make Twinkeltoes the mediator between players and designers. Still, this move fits in exactly with Habermas' explanation of how the bourgeoisie class formed and persuaded the monarchs of early modern England: they provided income and monies the monarch needed, and the more resourceful of this class parlayed those assets into influence and the ability to guide royal politics and policy when it came to trade. From this point forward, Twinkeltoes continues his reply with a plethora of his own opinions, and even receives praise from another shadowknight player for his "excellent" response.

#### The Creation of the Bourgeoisie Public Sphere

In this discussion, then, "private people are coming together as a public. . . to engage [the public authorities] in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange [items for sale for platinum and dollars] and social labor [the guilds]" (Habermas 27). At this stage, the "bon mots [turn] into arguments" (Habermas 31) and it is made publicly, authoritatively

clear just how their avatar classes are designed, how they can function, and, thus, what constitutes the avatars' particular roles within the economy that provides status, power, and social order. Here, interactants do not challenge "the concentration of powers of command that ought to be divided" but they use publicity (talk/writing/language in a public forum) to influence the direction of the domination to which they (the participants) submit. Community participants seek to ensure that their role remains vital to the community, or that it even increases in importance through the basic make-up of the items available to their avatar's class. Participants want to ensure their avatars are still needed within the guilds so they can continue to play an important part in the treadmill of raiding, acquisition, selling, improving, and consuming.

This space becomes the mixing together of the writing of self, the creation of agency among a cacophony of discourses, with the iconic literary narrative of the strong hero who raids "the bad guys, rescu[es] the girl, and ending up alone again: the strong, laconic, cool individual holding steady in a crazy world" (Covino 34). This ability to achieve this in a virtual world complicated

and problematized at every turn by (synthetic and material; a doubling of real world and cyber world matrixes of cultures) competing classes, worldviews, and theological outlooks is suddenly made coherent and enticing by the "traditional story of the fortunes of advanced literacy, continuing a centuries-old nostalgia for cosmological symbolic power and the belief that certain worthy individuals [can] achieve it" (Covino 35).

#### Magic and Literacy as Magic

##### The Secret, Unifying Code

Through a process described by William Covino as "transci-formation," language (text/talk/writing) is drafted into service on an unstoppable march to create a "magic procreative language" that is a "secret code that, once uttered, will change the shape of the corporate-cosmological matrix, a word that will, actually, de-create and re-create the world" (Covino 35). This type of belief in a "magical language," evocative of Foucault's discussion of language prior to Kant, taps into the urge for a return to a unified, shared culture dreamt of by proponents of modernity and modernity's gift to humanity: capitalism.

Capitalism must have this "shared culture" in order to flourish. Only in an environment where one language exists, and where this language is the only language that is used to communicate, can the monolithic conglomerates that marry technology and capital exist. The sum of the parts must be able to communicate across boundaries and cultures so it can move efficiently and turn a profit. Only with one, deified language and its accompanying grammar, iconic narratives, and rhetoric can the banalities of everyday existence be transcended and the business of generating more capital - in a never-ending treadmill much like the players of EverQuest experience - can be completed.

This magical transference occurs via technology, and in a novel turn, "magic," a bit of in-game coding that causes certain reactions in the virtual world, is part of the way that players acquire the things they desire. In this way, magic and technology become one, and the possibility of reaching this romantic "oneness" (one culture, one language, one narrative, one rhetoric, one worldview) is made visible. This drive for a magic that creates a "better" world is often thwarted in the material world, but in EverQuest it is rewarded. The interactants

who ascribe to the local customs of presentation of self, the strategies used to convince others, the use of observation, the use of item, avatar, and guild affiliation as cultural currency, are rewarded. The hero who embodies the "strong, laconic, cool individual holding steady in a crazy world" not only improves his character build in the virtual world of EverQuest, but he also has the ability to be praised by other members of the community. Perhaps even more importantly, he has the access to the true gods of EverQuest, the designers, on the message boards that represent the cyber community surrounding the game.

As all this cultural baggage bears down upon the virtual world of EverQuest, the real world discussions concerning the mechanics of the game makes the players and designers admit that the game is fake, and "once the 'total fake' is admitted, in order to be enjoyed it must seem totally real" (Eco 202). The way to make the game totally real is to re-establish the social order completely needed for a capitalistic society to run. Once the bourgeois class establishes itself by gamers speaking/writing themselves into existence, it becomes a force to be reckoned with inside the cyber community that is EverQuest. With the appearance of this class of people, public opinion

"[has] the insight into and [makes] visible the ordre naturel so that, in the form of general norms, the enlightened monarch [can] then make the latter the basis of his action" (Habermas 55). Through this phenomenon gamers with the most community cachet hope to bring the rule of EverQuest designers into alignment with their socially constructed concepts of right, wrong, good, bad, worth, relevance and scorn.

#### The Consequences of "Uberness" in a Synthetic World

While it is not absolutely necessary for players to have the highest amount of community cachet to participate in the public sphere, it does help. As Twinkeltoes writes "[i]t's about raiders playing the game as it is designed" ("Re: The Trend"), and this type of "play" is valued as the ideal within the virtual world that is the basis of the cyber community sprung up around EverQuest. The avatar that meets the community's idea of "uberness" has the ear of his fellow community members, and that avatar's word is taken more seriously. The avatar becomes the embodiment and representation for the uber player and through the prowess of the avatar, the avatar becomes the thrust for the uber player to post and state his opinion on the matters that influence the mechanics within the game. By

treating the commodity of the game, EverQuest, as real, all the players involved place the highest value on the commodities within the fabricated world. Through a fictional character, the über player is able to assume a new subject position that is intoxicating. Suddenly, the uber player (regardless of real world social status) is a person of importance.

This fictional life serves as the ideal public sphere: the general public has the possibility of access to the powers that be; all the general public needs to do is spend money within their budget, pour time into the game, and exchange bon mots on the right webpages – a virtual version of the things that the cultural elite do with the ruling class in the material world. By participating in this idealized material world rhetorical situation within the cyber community surrounding the game, the individual über participant is driven to protect and re-establish the social hierarchy that produces this situation.

In "Cyberpunk literacy; or, Piety in the Sky," Covino makes comparisons between the protagonist of William Gibson's Neuromancer, Case, and the material reality of the myths/narratives that drive technology literacy. Covino argues that even in a world postulated free from

traditional class distinctions and a place where literacy is "the only mode of effective counterpolitics in a corrupt, completely commodified world" (38) the same ideology exists. The ideology of one perfect language, one perfect narrative that, just like in Neuromancer, allows the material world incarnations of Case navigation about the world using the "traditional story of the fortunes of advanced literacy" that reifies a fictional "centuries-old nostalgia for cosmological symbolic power" and that only through being part of the exclusive unified culture that only "certain worthy individuals [can] achieve it" (34).

Instead of being hypothetical, or at best, an interesting topic of academic discussion, in EverQuest, Covino's idea is real. Members who understand the "'long formal names of programs'" (Gibson, qtd. in Covino 38) and the complex equations that dictate their avatars interactions in the synthetic world have access to all the right guilds, all the right websites, and can make all the right rhetorical moves that ensure their success. By understanding the grammar of EverQuest (the appropriate representation of self, how to speak convincingly, whom to speak with, where to get information, "the culture of power") rhetoric and literature come together; and the



persons who can navigate this virtual world using the right grammar are rewarded. With no corporeal self to represent these intereactants, they are, like the omnipotent Wintermute of Neuromancer, "[n]owhere. Everywhere ... the sum total of the works, the whole show.'" Still, in the cyber community surrounding EverQuest "[t]hings aren't different. Things are things.'" (Gibson qtd. in Covino 43) for the individual players. To be happy within the cyber community surrounding EverQuest, players must perform the monotonous tasks germane to capitalism and the reality of a capitalistic world. They must work for a corporation (guilds), they must earn DKP or Merit, and "they must purchase . . . a more expensive item" (Wilkie) using that DKP (or Merit) to maintain their social standing and to feel happy. As Rob Wilkie points out "[a]ll problems, according to the narrative of the game, are 'solved' by increasing one's level of consumption."

The uber player will reproduce the iconic narratives of capitalism and consumption because it benefits him to do so; and in this way, the cyber community of EverQuest is much like the physical world of Western society. The quasi-medieval world merely becomes a new stage for the ideology of capitalism to be spread and made to appear the

natural order of things, and "[not] natural, nor inevitable. It is a system built upon exploitation that is historical and thus transformable" (Wilkie). Through fictional avatars and personas created by the text produced on peripheral community websites, uber-players act out the narratives that not only make the game knowable and enticing, but also reconstruct and re-affirm the episteme of the Western world. EverQuest is real, because just like the material world the all participants know, money, power and respect are distributed among the very few.

Still, even with all these issues, EverQuest operates at the level of wish fulfillment for many of its players. EverQuest survives and thrives by maintaining and adding to its existing player base by using the rhetoric of utopia; and in particular it is the posthumanist concept of utopia. In this posthuman version of utopia all the ills of society are transcended through the uploading, even in mundane ways like playing EverQuest, of human consciousness into one, unified server where all things are attainable as long as one understands the appropriate methods of acquisition. In this style of utopia, capitalism and salvation become one, and older rhetorics – of gender, of the frontier, of manifest destiny – are utilized to convince players that

they exist in a synthetic utopia when participating in EverQuest. As I discuss in the next chapter, this is not the case. By promising these rewards using the same social framework as described in this chapter and in chapter one, EverQuest is not utopia, and very often, continues/reifies the unethical work practices and pejorative subject positions several interactants claim to be trying to escape by playing EverQuest in the first place. The promise of utopia, and the socially constructed dystopia that occurs because of this promise, is made possible by linking the genre of fantasy rpgs with the culturally specific dream of utopia.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FANTASY OF THE FRONTIER:  
IMPLICATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Dystopia

EverQuest, above everything else, constitutes a dystopian rhetoric in action. While writers distinct as Edward Castronova and Donna Haraway claim that online communities like EverQuest constitute a frontier space where participants are allowed to move beyond their current material world milieu, it is obvious by studying the artifacts created by this cultural phenomena that this is not the case. Through examining the work of T. L. Taylor, the game's design, marketing and advertising, the words of players themselves, and then placing these into conversation with my previous two chapters, we can see EverQuest as yet another Western utopian project. And, like other utopian projects, EverQuest fails, and by failing refracts and reifies the dystopic rhetoric of Western consumerism.

## How to Sell Fantasy as Utopia

To draw subscribers to the land of Norrath, the fictional world of EverQuest, SOE uses the Western rhetoric of the frontier, a pre-lapsarian Eden, the place that anything and everything is possible and probable.



Figure 2. The Advertisement for "The Buried Sea"

EverQuest. Sony Online Entertainment. 12 Mar. 2007.  
<<http://everquest.station.sony.com/>>.

In Figure 2, the advertisement for the newest expansion to EverQuest, all the classic images of the

frontier are present. A lush, untamed jungle surrounds the principle figures of the frame: snakes, rocks, jungle debris, and possibly skeletal remains surround a blood-smeared pedestal with a mysterious book placed atop it. Two torches illuminate a glowing portal, and in this portal the comely face of the EverQuest mascot, Firiona Vie, looks out longing towards the observer. Behind her is a raging sea battle – the hint that swashbuckling adventure and precious pirate loot is available for anyone hardy enough to step out of mundane material reality and into the exciting world of Norrath.

The book on the pedestal serves as the first reward for anyone quick enough to explore with her mouse. Literally, it is an “Easter egg”<sup>17</sup> that notifies the voyeur she’s discovered something if, and when, the voyeur rolls her pointer over the book by lighting up brightly. The book, once accessed, explains the history of Norrath (Figure 3). The information is conveyed as the travelogues of various adventurers who have traveled Norrath and been rewarded with adventure, knowledge, and power.

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<sup>17</sup> An “Easter egg” refers to a hidden feature in computer software, a website, a videogame, or a dvd.



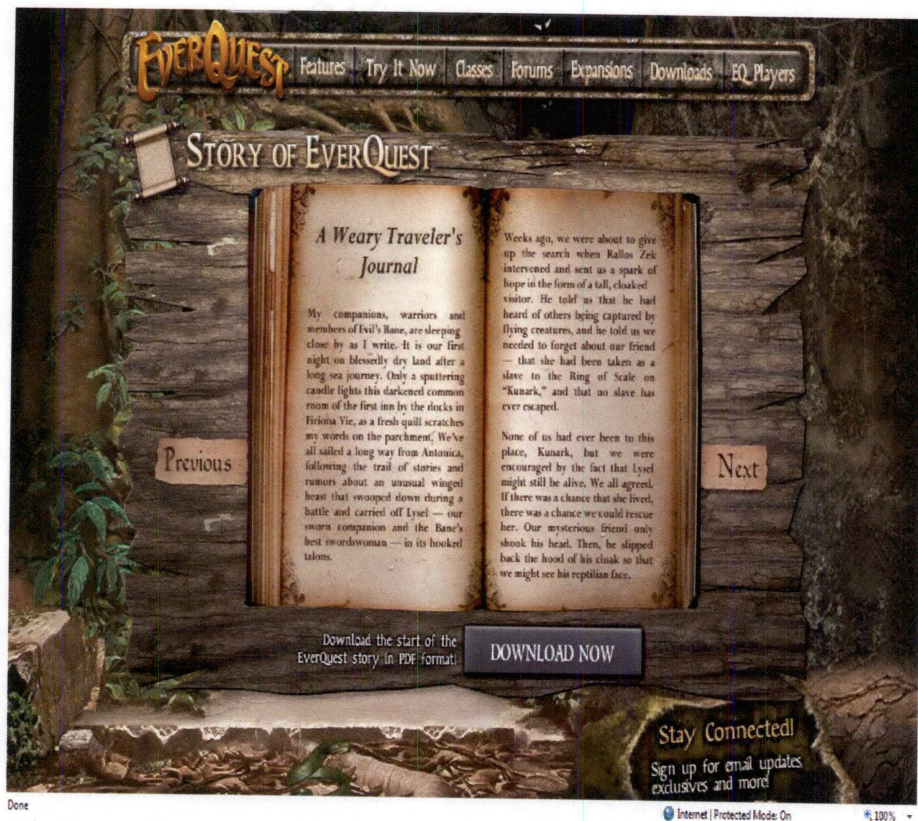


Figure 3. The Book

EverQuest. Sony Online Entertainment. 12 Mar. 2007.  
 <<http://everquest.station.sony.com/>>.

Clicking the portal presents a new screen (Figure 4). The information drops down on a plank, maybe from a ship destroyed in the battle going on behind our bikini-clad mascot. We see a quick synopsis in the corner about a lost city, a powerful leader, and treachery. In bullet points the screen exclaims "Ship to Ship Combat!—Raid pirate vessels!"



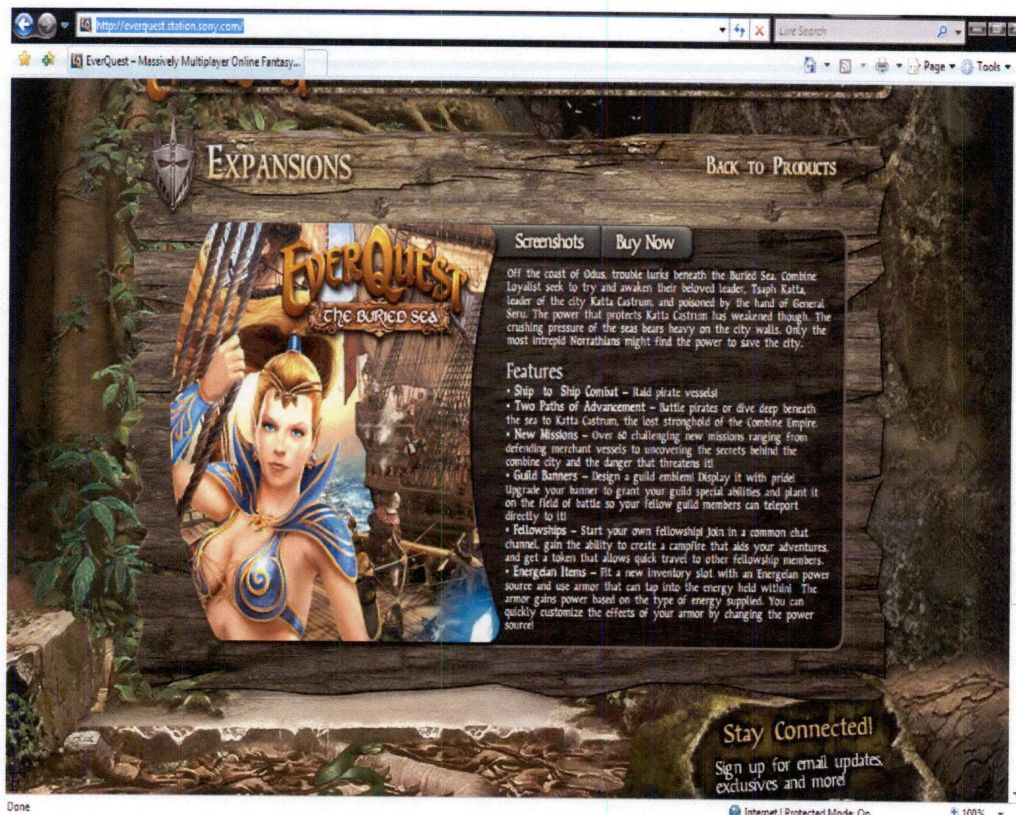


Figure 4. The New Screen Accessed via the Portal

EverQuest. Sony Online Entertainment. 12 Mar. 2007.  
<<http://everquest.station.sony.com/>>.

The rest of the outline calmly promises new and exciting ways not only to spend time, but to advance new or existing characters. Both ways seem exciting; explore a lost, underwater city and unravel a complex plot of politics and intrigue, or defend merchant ships on the sea from dastardly pirates. Above the user white, cat-like eyes blink from the dark. It seems that "The Buried Sea"



contains beings more dangerous than pirates and regicides in need of civilizing. It's a safe bet, since this is a fantasy adventure game, it should be done with the business end of a sword or a wand.

### The Frontier as Utopia

How is EverQuest a stab at utopia? The advertisement for "The Buried Sea" placed into the framework of Ziauddin Sardar's "alt.civilizations.faq: Cyberspace as the Darker Side of the West" answers this question nicely. The frontier, Sardar explains, is "an invented concept which recapitulate[s] an experience that [has] already passed." (18). In the website advertisement, pirates on wind-powered wooden ships come from a period long gone; allowing people to reinhabit this bygone era is a rhetorical ploy to evoke the emotions consumers feel when watching such fantasy fare as Disney's mega hit Pirates of the Caribbean. This newest EverQuest expansion creates a virtual world where players can experience a life like Captain Jack Sparrow's—"taking what you can, leaving nothin' for nobody else." Just like Captain Jack, EverQuest players can stop the intrigue of silver tongued politicians with brute force, battle pirates for stolen treasure, and beat back the hordes of natives

watching them with cat-like, non-Anglo eyes from the shadows.

EverQuest's mascot, the elven female Firiona Vie, herself serves as part of the frontier myth. "The first pictorial presentations of America" Sardar explains "are of a passive female virgin figure" (34). Sexualizing the new world as a defenseless virgin enables SOE to invoke the ghost of Manifest Destiny, to call forth cyber settlers who will objectify this new space, and therefore be able to consume and make profitable this formerly underutilized space. The land, in this case the prime server space that passes for synthetic terra firma, is too valuable and too precious to leave fallow. Sardar points out that this hyper-violent method of empowerment is made real for users through the concept of the "frontier," a Western rhetorical strategy that manufactures the desire to utilize new spaces.

The frontier is, according to Sardar, two things. First, it serves as "an idea ... a tool of domination that arises from the certainty that one already has total control." Second, it serves as "an instrument" which functions "to pass the routine practice of domination into the hands of the populace, to give them the illusion of

freedom while they merely act out the actual effective control that is already predetermined, scrutinised [sic] and seen to be good by those with power" (18).

Returning to the EverQuest User Agreement and Software License (as mentioned in chapter two), there is no question that SOE has absolute power over EverQuest. Players have little to no recourse if SOE decides to ban them from EverQuest. Once inside, players have very little contact with SOE or its representatives, since it is a "Customer Service State" (Castronova 210) where SOE employees interact with the population only when it is deemed absolutely necessary. This hands-off approach is the "illusion of freedom" that Sardar points out as part of the frontier trope: why bother the players when they are doing what has been deemed good by SOE? (Logging in, utilizing the cyberspace SOE has made by investing in servers, networking and creating friends, acquiring items through simulated violence, placing value on those items, placing value on the reputation of the avatar, logging out, and paying a monthly fee to continue on this treadmill to nowhere.)

And quite literally, EverQuest is a treadmill, a treadmill of killing, looting, and killing some more. The

ability of repeatedly enticing players to return to this treadmill demonstrates how well SOE has manipulated the frontier myth. EverQuest is a discursive space where a simple rpg is being sold, and it is also a space where the Posthuman Utopia, based on salvation through uploading consciousness into a synthetic space, is being sold.

EverQuest serves its users by becoming the Utopia that the frontier myth always proposes; EverQuest is "a Utopia that delivers what capitalism has always promised: a world where everything is nothing more than the total embodiment of one's reflected desires" (Sardar 34). This concept of reflected desires even allows theorists to project their desires of social and economic equality onto online communities, and when seen in the context of EverQuest, it is possible to see how these spaces are undeserving of such consideration.

### The Outcomes

#### To Be Woman in a Cyborg World

In "A Cyborg Manifesto," the cyborg is postulated as new identity that is a "creature in [the] post-gender world; it has no truck with ... unalienated labour [sic], or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final

appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (150). The cyborg, according to Haraway, is each and every one of us since "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs" (150). This "coupling between organism and machine" (Haraway 150) is how Haraway hypothesizes escaping the crushing banalities and dehumanizing routines of late stage capitalism; no longer being human means that you no longer fall into the ontological dichotomies that write their ways of being onto your body. EverQuest, a place where the average user spends 15-28 hours a week tightly coupled with their gaming machine of choice (The Norrathian Scrolls), complicates this proposed escape.

Using T. L. Taylor's experiences as a player from her book Play Between Worlds, we can see how concepts of gender identity, and the pejorative positions assigned to the female gender, are written as fixed and unchanging—even in the world of a cyborg. Even where cyborgs roam the frontier of Cyberium, there is still need for visual representation, and what is represented are socially constructed "normal" concepts of gender. As Taylor recounts "[m]y first character was a female Gnome Necromancer." Taylor

consciously chose the "gnome" instead of other available "races." She explains:

When I looked at the choices of female avatars available, I found what many women I have talked to over the years report: an assortment of fairly stereotypical sexualized bodies. Female avatars in [EverQuest], especially those derived from a basic human form, wear very little clothing and often have large chests and significant cleavage.

(13)

These "stereotypical sexualized bodies" lead to various problems for women in EverQuest. "Katinka," a female avatar that Taylor befriended during her work in EverQuest, describes one common scenario. "You're sitting there" Katinka explains, "minding your own business and somebody says 'Hey, nice boobs'" (119). Clearly, this construction of the female identity – by male interactants and the SOE designers – as sexual beings always and already ready for heteronormative sex is troubling.

Equally troubling is how SOE perceives women as part of their economic base. Taylor asserts that 20-30% of the EverQuest player base is female (94), yet often they are ignored. One area of contention consistently discussed is

this issue of female embodiment in EverQuest. In Play Between Worlds, one anonymous player exclaims

I would like the chars [sic] to not look like they all have some bizarre form of scoliosis ...

I just don't want to play [a character] where body parts are hanging out to the world ...

Anyways, it is annoying, but I keep reminding myself that [they] probably did not consider women a viable market share of the game when they designed it. (111-12)

This comment's importance becomes clear when the final section is analyzed. This woman is trying "to imagine her place in the designers mind" and whether she has a right to be at the gaming table. She is, quite frankly, trying to force herself to accept the normative behaviors assigned to her, since the ideal user is seen as a male who enjoys traditional fantasy representations of women. This assignment of identity through body type also reifies the designers' ideas of how women should behave in their world. The cyborg, "the coupling between organism and machine," appears to be nothing more than a (re)fabrication of the "ideal woman" from the material world: Barbie in a chain mail bikini.

However, that any of the player base (female or male) accepts this (re)fabrication of women points back to Baudrillard and the "brute fascination of images." Only in an environment built on images where there is a loss of meaning could players (or observers) willfully overlook the social and historical events that make this portrayal of woman so inappropriate. This world of images allows the discourses and narratives considered unacceptable outside the game to be fully articulated in the virtual world of EverQuest<sup>18</sup>. The signifiers and those things signified transmitted through this all encompassing state of simulacra are snapped from historical context. This allows all the participants involved in EverQuest (players, designers, developers) the ability to disassociate the power of cultural narratives from the images produced by the game. In this way, everyone involved can marginalize the importance of EverQuest as a discursive space citing it is "only a game;" and since it is only a game the players, and their visceral responses, are marginalized even more.

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<sup>18</sup> In Dungeons and Dragons these narratives are even more pronounced. See the Dungeons and Dragons Player's Hand Book 3.5 Core Rulebook I v.3.5 or the RPGA's "Living Greyhawk Campaign" paraphernalia.



This ability to marginalize and yet still take players' money continues on in even more unsettling ways. Using Taylor's research, we can see a complicated (and perhaps more realistic) definition of "fun," and the "fun" she proposes is something culturally specific to a Western capitalistic society. As Taylor points out, "fun" in EverQuest is not "leisure," but the active work towards a set of goals, on "efficiency, on (often painful) learning, rote and boring tasks, heavy doses of responsibility, and intensity of focus"(88). It is, in fact, an architectural power structure specific to a consumer society.

Buttress this architecture of consumerism with the guild system, and EverQuest turns into a complete reproduction of the material world that the players know and understand. Through this technology players and developers construct an architecture that reifies the mainstream narratives which describe how to be. EverQuest becomes an architecture built on images and texts that operate "to transform individuals; to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them" (Foucault, Discipline 172). This architecture not only shapes the players who willing come

to EverQuest as a place of leisure, but it also affects those who intentionally come to EverQuest as a place of work.

### The Feminization of Workers

Using Taylor's definition of fun it is possible to see players' time in the synthetic world of EverQuest as service work, and as highly profitable service that benefits SOE. Returning to Sardar's image of virgin territory, thinking of these cyborgs as hundreds of thousands of individual Firiona Vies, it can be said that SOE has found their frontier. Conquering and molding these cyborgs allows SOE to make money from all the chimeras that participate in EverQuest; cyborgs, despite Haraway's hopes, do have truck with unalienated labor and do give themselves over to a larger unity: the unity of the corporation, SOE. Because SOE offers this culturally acceptable chance to escape the mundane, it has found a way to harness the power of cyborgs even in their supposed leisure time. Rob Wilke explains this phenomenon of profiting from fun as "capitalism [turning] all aspects of daily life into avenues for exploiting labor for new profits."

This phenomenon has ramifications inside and outside of the game, and even outside of SOE's control. Financially

successful service orientated third party sites like IGE maintain "its world headquarters in midtown Manhattan and [throw] lavish dinners for MMORPG cognoscenti at game conventions" (Castronova 164). IGE makes enough money that it was able to buy out its competitor, Yantis, for \$10 million. IGE provides a plethora of services with "a small army of technically savvy but low-wage workers [at their Hong Kong offices who can] field orders, load up avatars, retrieve stored [virtual] goods" (Castronova 164), and get them to the user who has perused their website and paid for a particular item, piece of gear, or entire character account. The player, once her payment is confirmed, can log into EverQuest and wait "for a message from [her] friendly in-world IGE rep, who will quickly bring" the goods to her (Castronova 164).

This type of global commerce based on the labor of low-paid employees, or gendered synthetic bodies playing out the normative behaviors of Western society, is exactly what Haraway envisions escaping with the creation of the cyborg. As Haraway explains "[t]o be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour [sic] force; seen less as workers than servers; subjected to some arrangements on and

off the paid job that make a mockery of the limited work day; leading to an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex" (166). The cyborg has been utilized to make this dystopia a reality. SOE profits from the labor of these cyborg cyber-settlers within this synthetic frontier it has created - much like the colonial powers of old in the material world - as the cyber-settlers toil away for 15 to 28 hours a week. Then, there is existence of low-paid Hong Kong tech workers, whose work days can go for 14 hours and their pay has been estimated at something around 56 cents an hour (Marshall). Finally, there is the vulnerability of both parties involved. Violating any part of the EverQuest User Agreement and Software License can end in banishment from the game with no legal recourse; and the "technically savvy but low-wage workers" not only work in an unregulated industry, but also depend on a plethora of make believe items for their subsistence. Also, these workers are always in the tenuous position of their one product falling out of vogue and becoming worthless - meaning they, too, become worthless. All the parties involved (either in EverQuest or at IGE) are all feminized regardless of their actual sex. Every one of the participants is always already working for

some corporation because they take part in an activity steeped in and (re)producing consumer ideology.

"The homework economy," the "world capitalist organizational structure" that Haraway predicts as the future of women in Western technological society is "made possible (not caused by) the new technologies" (Haraway 166) of the cyborg. The avatar that represents the cyborg and the technology that has made it possible are still informed by the disciplining mechanisms that Haraway posits sidestepping. The cyborg refracts, but does not elude, the dystopic realities/rhetoric of Western life. The world of alienation, fragmentation, and the manic drive for wealth through acquisition still occur in this new frontier of Western society. It occurs through, and because of, the cyborg and online spaces like EverQuest.

#### The Fusion of the Material and Virtual Episteme

The electronic frontier, and its current state as a continuation of the material world demonstrates (as mentioned in chapter one) the epistemic fusion of material reality and virtual reality. Through being porous one informs the other and (re)produces the practices, rhetoric, and narratives that exist in the material world of Western

society. SOE, by using the rhetorics of the frontier, establishes a finite set of choices for the interactants to make sense of the synthetic world they occupy; at the same time the enacting of these choices by the players merely reifies the beliefs most players hold in the material world and engenders the same biases and inequities of the material existence in the synthetic world. EverQuest is the product of the culture, time, and place that spawned it. In viewing EverQuest as an unfinished text, one that is constantly evolves yet consistently conforms to Western society's ideas of how to be, it is possible to see this synthetic world as a place where the episteme, underlying ideologies, and tragic consequences of the "business society" (to borrow from Fredric Jameson) are made visible through the act of play.

EverQuest neither actively promotes nor creates the rhetorics and narratives that promote class and gender inequality. It does, however, serve as an example of Western society's continued use of these stories as manifest in all of its textual productions. Regardless of the genre, players and creators – the complete set of interactants within this synthetic society – re-enact the beliefs and practices, informed by Western capitalism, that

create order and stability in the material world. These social practices, coupled with the players' desire to assume Habermas' defined subject position of the bourgeoisie, produce a synthetic world that is no different than "real" world of present day America. Regardless of the text, the values of a society obsessed with class structure and the ability to "whisper into the ear of Leviathan," the ruling elite of society, will always bleed through the foregrounded purpose of said text. EverQuest, like other texts, serves as part of a larger cultural architecture that always promotes the social status quo. EverQuest is not part of a fascist conspiracy, but part of a quiet, subtle and unassuming social architecture that ensures the comforting, reassuring, and safe practices of the cultural mainstream are always enacted. This endeavor, while it does preclude more liberatory ways of living and being, is endorsed and performed since it fulfills the individual player's desires for social power within this social architecture, and the different, commingled corporations' desires for profit.

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